

“The politicians had to obey the crowd”

Interview on the protests in Kiev

Autonomous Workers Union

January 30, 2014

This interview with a comrade from the Autonomous Workers' Union in Kiev was done on January 28, 2014. It sheds some light on the events around the Maidan: the array of reasons behind the protests, their focus on the hated president, the differences to the “orange revolution”, the role of the right, the weakness of social struggles and possible scenarios.

Q: Looking at the pictures from Kiev, it seems that all kinds of people are at the barricades. In your opinion, what brings them together? What do the people at the barricades and all the supporters discuss? Merely the practical issues of the fight against the cops? Or are there assemblies, or other forms of “organized” debates, at the barricades or elsewhere?

A: The main motive for the protests right now is extreme unpopularity of the president. Of course, the actual reasons are economic crisis, social inequality, corruption, decay of social services, poverty, unemployment – the usual set of grievances which make people go into the streets these days. This is not a leftist dogma; people do speak about all these issues. But nevertheless the force which made them stop grumbling at their kitchens and protest loudly is their feelings towards president Yanukovich. The demand of president’s resignation is the ultimate one; unfortunately, this is the most radical thing people can actually think about.

The second thing is the sheer hatred towards the police forces. But then again, protesters just don’t think there’s anything wrong with the fact that one of the leaders of the protests – Yuriy Lutsenko – himself used to be Minister of the Interior; during that time Berkut and other special police forces existed as usual, and Lutsenko himself had announced that he would disperse protesting crowds with tear gas. So, here, too, protest against police as such (it has extremely bad reputation among all social classes here) is channeled into relatively harmless direction.

The president, his government and police are main subjects of discussions, I guess. Protesters’ main task, as they see it, is to get rid of the Party of Regions, that’s all. A small fraction talks about shifting the balance of power in the constitution from president to parliament. But of course, the main topics are indeed the practical matters – tear gas, food, shields, Molotov cocktails, tactics of street battles, and endless rumors – about the imminent threat of introducing the state of emergency, about snipers and riot police (whether they are Russians or not, whether they intend to fight any longer etc.).

About the assemblies – no, I don't know anything of the sort. The situation is too dynamic and unstable to do any such things, I guess; so, I don't see any forms of direct democracy evolving at the barricades right now.

Q: It seems that there are a lot of attacks on or occupations of government buildings, but the “normal” life in the city goes on. Is that so? Are people working during the day and going to the barricades at night in Kiev? What other forms of protest play a role? I heard about university faculties being occupied? Is anything going on at work-places against the late or non-payment of wages, for instance?

A: Yes, that's true. Only the central parts of Kiev are affected by the protests while in other areas business goes as usual, nothing is interrupted. There were several attempts to declare national political strike but they failed miserably: the opposition doesn't have any instruments for this, no political organization has a nationwide network of workplace cells, and the people themselves are also simply not used to such thing as strike. The only force that could theoretically do this – the old bureaucratic Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine – is neutral. The student union Direct Action is trying to organize students' strike – so far they've partly managed to do this only in one university, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. So, yes, most people work or study, spending their free time at the barricades.

There's an initiative group called Automaidan – car owners who use their vehicles for blocking the traffic, especially in the vicinity of important government sites or near the residences of people in power. One more form of protest employed here is the customers' boycott of goods manufactured by capitalists who belong to the Party of Regions. It turned out to be relatively successful, at least according to some reports.

There's been only one university occupation so far, and I'm not sure you can call it that, actually. Our comrades from Direct Action do try to occupy the whole campus and block all activities there but as far as I understand it is not physically occupied yet.

Protests at workplaces concerning wages etc. hasn't been connected to the political protests so far. For example, workers of Kyivpastrans – the communal enterprise which controls urban transit – held their protests in December, some leftist organizations helped them, but they didn't go so far as to declare an Italian strike and they didn't join Maidan. Actually, the local government did their best to pay them all the arrears in the end of December to calm them down.

Q: One of the last huge mobilization in the Ukraine was the “orange revolution”. In comparison, what is different today? Does anyone refer to that “history”? How are the protesters talk about “democracy”? And what hopes are connected with a EU-membership?

A: First of all, the “orange revolution” was a highly personalized protest. People concentrated on a specific goal – to install their leader, Viktor Yushenko, in the president's seat. Yushenko's political structures controlled the crowd pretty tightly and organized everything very smoothly. Now the three leaders of the parliamentary opposition are not trusted by a majority of protesters. They represent Maidan at the negotiations with the President, but many people are not sure they have a mandate for that. For example, last Thursday they were booed by the crowd, and Maidan didn't accept their conditions which had been negotiated with Yanukovich. Despite all their anger, the politicians had to obey the crowd; generally, people are much more radical than their “representatives”. The whole mobilization in November came as a surprise for them, and since then they couldn't grasp the events and take a lead. This vacuum was momentarily filled by the far-right groups.

Another difference is that in 2004 the scope of issues discussed was much wider. The whole “revolution” was dedicated to presidential elections, but still, you could legitimately propose left agenda there, discuss social and economic issues. In that respect, that protest was much more heterodox than the current one; now you can only talk about the matters of bourgeois politics. Any attempt to put forward other issues puts you at risk of being labeled as a “provocateur”.

I wouldn't say that people imagine many parallels between the events of 2004 and the current protests. First of all, during the last ten years there appeared a new generation of young people who had been schoolkids back then. And now they are an important part of the mobilization. Second of all, Viktor Yushchenko turned out to be a major disappointment for all participants of the “orange revolution”.

Protesters naturally say that they want a truly (bourgeois) democratic state, with the rule of law etc. They imagine that the only thing which separates them from this ideal is Viktor Yanukovich. And they are convinced that the EU membership is synonymous with democracy, also prosperity and all other good things. EU serves as a myth concentrating all their hopes; while Russia is a land of Mordor in this mythological view of the world.

Q: Right-wing parties and fascist groups play a role in the protests. How important are they actually? Do they get much support? How do other protesters relate to them?

A: Far right party Svoboda is the most organized of the three large political forces trying to control the protest. They are the only party which has real active cells in various regions, actual activist base. So, as the most organized and the most ideological of the three, they are gaining the most. Apart from Svoboda, there is an umbrella coalition of neo-nazi militant groups. It is called Right Sector. They were formed in the beginning of the protests, and by now they've succeeded to gain enormous prominence and conquer sympathies from apolitical and liberal people. They are mostly famous by their demonstrative militancy and aggression, and the public doesn't see anything wrong with these cute young patriots. Lately, the same pattern repeats in other regions, where neo-nazi football hooligans turned out to be the main assault force fighting the police and pro-government thugs.

The fascist hegemony was indisputable until January 19th, when the protests were joined by lots of other people – random apolitical citizens, liberals and even the left. That happened because the agenda of the protests shifted to repealing the “dictatorship laws” passed on January 16. Since then they had to step back a bit but nevertheless it's obvious that in the long run these protests will enormously benefit the far right, whoever wins. In the case of the victory of the opposition, they will surely get themselves the police forces, special services etc. If Yanukovich wins, this means that half of the country will become firm supporters of the far-right as supposedly the only patriotic radical force able to confront the dictator.

Meanwhile, most left activists also joined the protests after January 19 because those laws will severely damage them as well. They found their niche in infrastructural activities, such as vigils in emergency hospitals: they stay there in order to prevent police and thugs kidnap the wounded. Other area of left activity is the above mentioned attempt at igniting the political strike.

Q: From outside the protest seems to have a lot in common with the one in Istanbul last year (well, surely not the temperatures...). Do the protesters in Kiev and elsewhere in the Ukraine see a connection to the uprisings around the globe in the past few years?

A: There may be some parallels drawn indeed, but from the subjective point of view of Ukrainian protesters those other protests don't exist. They see these events as a purely national struggle, trying to embed them into Ukrainian history, not into the global wave of protests.

Q: Last not least, you have been following the movement from its beginning, and I have read some of your statements. What is your hope for the protest, what positive outcome can you imagine? What is the worst outcome you can imagine? What kind of support do you expect from outside the Ukraine?

A: Like I said, there are two possible outcomes. One is the victory of Yanukovych, which will bring about a harsh authoritarian regime in the mould of Latin American dictatorships of 1970s. Still, it will be problematic to govern the country for Yanukovych because he will still be supported by half of population at best; dictatorships cannot survive in such conditions. One of the probable scenarios then can be emerging of a militant underground guerilla movement not unlike the IRA in Northern Ireland of 1980s and 1990s.

The other outcome will be eventual victory of the parliamentary opposition. This will result in a weak bourgeois democratic republic, politically unstable but retaining the basic freedoms – like Ukraine in 2005–2009. Only now the fascists will be much stronger both in the power lobbies and in the streets.

Now, there is also third scenario – maybe that would be the worst one – it's the full-fledged civil war between Western and Central Ukraine, including Kiev, on the one side, and South and East, on the other. Naturally this would be catastrophic because people will fight for nationalist chimeras on both sides. On the other hand, this still looks unlikely to me because Ukraine is such a large industrial country. The EU, Russia and other global powers are unlikely to allow a chaotic war zone in a country which has major gas and oil transit routes, 15 atomic reactors etc.

I guess in such conditions the best form of support from abroad would be efforts to make the Ukrainian government back off, but without showing solidarity with the far-right. My guess is that such messages – “we support your struggle but not your fascists” – would be optimal form of pressure from abroad.

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